

John Locke's Three Fallacies

Version 1.3

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John Locke (1632-1704) has been perhaps the most influential of English philosophers. He is famous for his liberal political ideas (civil rights, democracy, religious toleration, etc.) and also for his empiricist philosophy of knowledge, science and psychology, in which he followed in the tradition of Francis Bacon.

His main contribution in the second area is his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1690. In it he develops his philosophy of empiricism, which emphasizes the role of sense experience in knowledge, and downplays the role of pure reasoning.

In the course of this he touches on the issue of the arguments by which people are persuaded, of which he considers four types, three of which, he says, are fallacious.

— John Locke¹ (1690) —

19. Before we quit this subject, it may be worth our while a little to reflect on *four sorts of arguments*, that men, in their reasonings with others, do ordinarily make use of to prevail on their assent; or at least so awe them as to silence their opposition.

I. The first is, to allege the opinions of men, whose parts², learning, eminency, power, or some other cause has gained a name, and settled their reputation in the common esteem with some kind of authority. When men are established in any kind of dignity, it is thought a breach of modesty for others to derogate any way from it, and question the authority of men who are in possession of it. This is apt to be censured, as carrying with it too much pride, when a man does not readily yield to the determination of approved authors, which is wont to be received with respect and submission by others: and it is looked upon as insolence, for a man to set up and adhere to his own opinion against the current stream of antiquity; or to put it in the balance against that of some learned doctor, or otherwise approved writer. Whoever backs his tenets with such authorities, thinks he ought thereby to carry the cause, and is ready to style it impudence in any one who shall stand out against them. This I think may be called the *argumentum ad verecundiam*.

II. Secondly, Another way that men ordinarily use to drive others, and force them to submit their judgments, and receive the opinion in debate, is to require the adversary to admit what they assign as a proof, or to assign a better. And this I call *argumentum ad ignorantiam*.

III. Thirdly, A third way is to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions. This is already known under the name of *argumentum ad hominem*.

IV. The fourth is the using of proofs drawn from any of the foundations of knowledge or probability. This I call *argumentum ad iudicium*. This alone of all the four brings true instruction with it, and advances us in our way to knowledge. For 1. It argues not another man's opinion to be right because I, out of respect, or any other consideration but that of conviction, will not contradict him. 2. It proves not another man to be in the right way, nor that I ought to take the same with him, because I know not a better. 3. Nor does it follow that another man is in the right way because he has shown me that I am in the wrong. I may be modest, and therefore not oppose another man's persuasion: I may be ignorant, and not be able to produce a better: I may be in error, and another may show me that I am so. This may dispose me, perhaps, for the reception of truth, but helps me not to it: that must come from proofs and arguments, and light arising from the nature of things themselves, and not from my shamefacedness, ignorance or error.

Notice that Locke is himself here introducing three of the four Latin tags; they are not 'medieval', as is often thought; only the term *ad hominem*, he says, is already in use.

The four key Latin words have the following meanings³:

verecundia, ae, f., *shamefastness, bashfulness, shyness, coyness, modesty, shame, reserve.*
ignorantia, ae, f., *want of knowledge, unacquaintance, ignorance.*
homo, inis, m. and f., *a human being, man, person.*
iudicium, i, n., *a judgement, judicial investigation, trial, legal process, sentence.*

1. John Locke (1632-1704), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, *Of Knowledge and Probability*; Chapter xvii *Of Reason*, Sections 19-22.

2. An old word for abilities, capacities, talents.

3. Charlton T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York: American Book Company, 1918).

So what we have are arguments addressed to modesty, to ignorance, to the person and to judgement.

The idea of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy has undergone a subtle shift since Locke's time. It is now identified with the error of making an improper appeal to authority, so much so that that many of today's logic students imagine that 'verecundiam' actually means 'authority'; discussion of it generally focusses on the problem of distinguishing good authorities from bad, an issue that does not concern Locke.

The idea of the *ad ignorantiam*, on the other hand, remains pretty much as Locke left it.

The term '*ad iudicium*', which does not refer to a fallacy at all but rather to a good argument, has dropped out of use.

The case of the *ad hominem* is much more complicated. At least four distinct ideas have been attached to that phrase.

1. Attacking someone's way of putting a point rather than the point itself.

The term *ad hominem* goes back to the Latin translation of a phrase Aristotle uses in passing in his *Sophistical Refutations*⁴. This occurs when Aristotle is discussing what you should do when the sophist lures you into making a statement, and then attacks you with one of his sophistical refutations.

For example, the sophist asks, "Even when you are not actually playing the harp you still have the ability to play it, do you not?" You naturally answer, "Yes." But then he nails you with, "So you can play the harp when you are not playing it; that is, you are saying that you can both play and not play at the same time?"

Now the right move for you to make here, says Aristotle, is to point out the basic word-grouping ambiguity in the sophist's argument: you have the ability-to-play-the-harp when you are not playing it, but you never have the ability-to-play-the-harp-when-you-are-not-playing-it.

But if you make the wrong move, you may fall into *ad hominem* in Aristotle's sense. For example, you might reply that you never said that you could always play the harp in every way in which you can play it. This would get you off the hook temporarily since you could treat playing-it-when-you-are-not-playing-it as simply one way of playing it, a tricky way which you needn't go in for. But this wouldn't get to the root of the problem, and another sophist could still get you by asking whether you can at any time play in all the ways that you can play at that time. You would only have responded to *the man*, that is, to his particular way of putting the argument, not to the argument itself⁵.

2. Defending your position by showing that the other person is wrong.

Locke's idea is totally different. For him, when you use an *ad hominem* argument against me you may really prove that my position is mistaken; his point is that you don't thereby prove that your own position is correct.

3. Arguing on the basis of the other person's beliefs

Locke's followers developed still another idea of *ad hominem*; for them, you use an *ad hominem* argument when you argue on the basis of what the other person believes rather than on the basis of the truth. This idea is expressed by Isaac Watts (1674-1748):

Isaac Watts⁶ (1724)

When [the argument] is built upon the professed Principles or Opinions of the Person with whom we argue, whether the Opinion be true or false, it is named *Argumentum ad Hominem*, an Address to our professed Principles.

4. Attacking the other person's credibility, character, etc.

Nowadays, people, and logic books, generally regard *ad hominem* as an attack aimed at the credibility, character, etc., of a person, rather than the person's position.

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4. See 177b33, 178b17 and 183a21, and C. L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 161. Aristotle's discussion of this is difficult; the account given here involves some rather strenuous and debatable interpretation.

5. In Latin, the contrast is between *ad hominem* and *ad orationem*.

6. Isaac Watts, *Logick*, Part III, Chapter ii, Section 5.